

Statement on Cambodia, 13 January, 2014

The **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)**, the **ITUC Asia-Pacific** and **IndustriALL-SE Asia Office** (the global union federation branch representing garment workers in this region) have today completed an urgent four-day mission to Cambodia to respond to the workers' rights crisis in the country. As with workers, governments and employers from around the world, we were horrified by the serious human rights violations that were committed here in recent weeks, including the use of deadly force by security forces to quell the protests in the industrial zones.

During our visit, we met with our affiliated unions, representatives of the government and the garment manufacturers and other important organizations. Our purpose was simple - to attempt to build a consensus among the social partners on a way forward based on respect for fundamental workers' right, social justice and rule of law. In our view, we cannot expect the re-establishment of industrial peace in Cambodia unless certain matters are resolved in the immediate term. These include:

The 23 prisoners who were arrested in the context of the recent demonstrations in the garment sector must be released immediately and charges dropped. As many were beaten, some severely, by the security forces, all necessary medical attention must be provided.

As called for by the UN, a credible, independent inquiry must be established immediately to investigate the killing of garment workers on 3 January. The use of lethal force against the demonstrating workers was manifestly excessive and must be condemned. Those responsible for the killings must be held accountable.

Trade union leaders and activists who were dismissed or suspended for participating in legitimate trade union activity, including the strikes and demonstrations intended to seek an increase to the extremely low minimum wage rate, must be reinstated. In the case that short-term contracts of union activists were not renewed on a discriminatory basis, those workers must be re-employed.

The newly established wage commission is welcome but it must come forth with a new proposal for a minimum wage that meets the needs of garment workers and their families. Such a process should take no longer than 60 days, at which time the government must set the new wage rate. Indeed, a recent informal survey by IndustriALL of garment workers as to the wage necessary to cover basic expenses for the workers and her family would be around US\$265 per month. The garment sector in Cambodia is a highly-profitable industry, earning \$5.1 billion annually. Manufacturers, and in turn international brands, can certainly afford to pay substantially more than the \$100 a month currently on offer. The economic development benefits to Cambodia as a whole from the payment of a liveable wage would also be immediate.

Finally, the right to freedom of association of all parties must be respected. We are particularly concerned by the government's threats to deregister trade unions simply because they went on strike for an increase in the minimum wage proposal – activity that is clearly protected by international instruments that Cambodia has ratified – including ILO Convention 87. We also strongly caution employers and their associations against attempts to bankrupt unions by lawsuits for compensation or damages. Both moves would only further inflame tensions and make any hope of rebuilding industrial peace nearly impossible. Moreover, we simply do not believe that independent

trade unions were responsible for the violence and property destruction that was carried out by provocateurs who took advantage of the situation.

Unfortunately, our sincere efforts to build bridges with the garment manufacturers association were met with outright hostility and with a complete disregard to the sustainability of the industrial relations. Indeed, GMAC embraced the prospect of creating further conflict in the industry. We hope that the hard rhetoric was just that, and that there may still be a way forward, but we cannot but express our deep disappointment with their attitude. We appreciated the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Labour today. We conveyed to him our serious concerns and urged the government to take immediate action on each of the items previously mentioned. We explained that it was in fact in the government's own best interests to ensure respect for workers' rights and the payment of a liveable wage, which are the foundation to any sustainable industry. We made it clear that we will continue to monitor the situation closely, including future visits, and will continue to maintain our vigilance until each of these critical issues is fully resolved.